

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Samuel P. Langley, September 27, 1902, with transcript

September 27, 1902. Dr. S. P. Langley, Secretary Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. Dear Prof. Langley:

I know that you must be as greived as I am at the death of Major Powell. He was one of our great men; and Science in America, especially in the National Capital, owes him a debt of gratitude that it can never repay.

Impressed with the feeling that Major Powell was nearing his end, I visited him a few days ago at his summer place on the Maine coast. For some time past I have been studying on the Maine coast. For some time past I have been studying the Bureau of Ethnology, which I know he looked upon as his monument, with the object of familiarizing myself with its work; and forming an independent judgment as to what should be done with it after his decease. I was in hopes that the Major might be able to talk with me about the affairs of the Bureau, so that I could report to the Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, and to yourself, his last wishes concerning the matter, but, unfortunately, I was too late. I found the Major in a comatose condition and he died within a very few days.

As he had been unable to examine the administrative report prepared for him by Dr. W. J. McGee as the Acting Director of the Bureau of Ethnology, I requested permission, as a member of the Executive Committee of the Regents, to look it over myself.

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This report meets with my hearty approval, and the suggestions contained in it come right in line with my own thoughts concerning the proper work of the Bureau. It confirms the impressions gained from a perusal of the past publications of the Bureau that this branch of the public service is of importance to the country and should be maintained with

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undiminished vigor. I think also that the scope of its operations should be extended very much on the lines laid down by the Acting Director in his report. I am so much interested in this matter, as a member of the Executive Committee of the Regents, I propose to pay considerable attention to the affairs of the Bureau in the future. I am convinced of its importance to the American people, and would like to be of assistance in directing its policy into useful channels. I should also like to be instrumental in establishing the Bureau as a memorial worthy of Major Powell, its originator and first Director.

I am heartily in sympathy with the suggestion made by the Acting Director, that the guiding policy of the Bureau should be, Applied Ethnology. A great deal of valuable and interesting information concerning the American Aborigines has already been collected: now let this information be applied to use. Let it be analyzed and studied by experts in the interests of the people of the United States; and let new facts be accumulated having a bearing upon current questions of practical moment. I am especially impressed with the Acting Director's suggestions 3 regarding the different lines of inquiry that should be pursued to this end.

It is interesting to be told that our least populated arid regions in the southwest, yield abundant evidence of a numerous population in prehistoric times; and it is surely of importance to the present residents of the regions that a full enquiry should be made as to the means by which so large an Indian population was formerly supported. Where barely 30,000 people, whites and Indians combined, now manage to scrape a livelihood, we are told that an Indian population formerly existed of at least 300,000. The Indians had accommodated themselves to their environment, and had learned from experience to depend upon crops and food supplies specially suited to the climate; whereas the white man lives upon the food to which he has been accustomed in more temperate climates which are not so well suited for production in an arid region, and knows little of the natural resources developed by his predecessors. The statement that the whole Indian population was supported for at least two months each year by the fruit of the cactus plant, is of interest in connection with the fact that the white settlers do not use this plant for food at all. Many of the foods and dishes employed by the Indians, are practically

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unknown to the whites, although both palatable and nutritious. The white man owes to the Indian, corn, potatoes, certain beans and squashes, tobacco, two varieties of cotton, the domestic turkey, and a number of food preparations like succotash and hominy, which have come into general use. Pinole, however, tamale and pemmican⁴ though admirable food preparations, are only locally used, while other desirable dishes, through ignorance, are entirely neglected. The textile fabrics made by the Indians also reveal materials that might well be utilized at the present day. The extinct industries of the Indians should be studied from a utilitarian point of view. The plants and animals found useful by them should be made known to our people for their benefit. In a word, the Bureau should apply for the benefit of the American people, the information collected regarding the Indians, the development of the science of Applied Ethnology, should be one of its great aims in the future.

The Acting Director has recommended that a small addition should be made to the Congressional appropriation for applying the principles of ethnology to the American people, and this proposal meets with my hearty approval.

PROPOSED EXPANSION OF THE SCOPE OF THE BUREAU.

² The bureau has hitherto confined its attention almost exclusively to the pure blood Indians of the United States. I approve of the suggestion that its work should be extended to cover the Meztizos and other mixed bloods; for it is through the mixed bloods that we are assimilating the Indian blood into our population. The thoroughbred Indians have been largely segregated on reservations, and to us are more objects of curiosity than anything else; but the mixed bloods touch our own population and are assimilated in a greater or less degree by the 5 people of the United States. It is more important therefore, to us — as more nearly touching our own people- that the Meztizos should be studied, than the pure blood Indians themselves.

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I also approve of the suggestion that the scope of the Bureau should be expanded to keep pace with the territorial growth of the United States. The appropriations of Congress are made "for continuing researches relating to the American Indians under the direction of the Smithsonian Institution". I think that the scope of the Bureau should be expanded to include the aboriginal races inhabiting Porto Rico, the Hawaiian Islands, the Philippine Islands, and other islands in the Pacific Ocean, owned by the United States. It is important that Congress should have reliable information concerning these different races, in order to deal with them properly; and it should surely be within the province of the Bureau of Ethnology to supply that information. I also approve of the suggestion that Congress should look to the Bureau for information concerning the races of men as immigrants upon our shores, so as to be guided wisely in the framing of immigration laws. Ethnic problems of the greatest interest and importance to the American people arise from the presence of Chinese in our country, and a colored population of African descent.

In my opinion the Bureau of Ethnology should cover the whole field of American Ethnology, and not be limited to the aborigines alone. It should deal with all races of men that inhabit the United States and its territories or possessions. It should study the differences which characterize them, and the effect of the blending of the different races into a new people.

We are a nation of mixed blood; and it is surely important to us as a people to know what kind of mixture results in an improved and higher race, and what mixture results in deterioration. It would also be of importance to us that the viability and fecundity of the different races and mixed bloods should be enquired into.

It is an impressive fact that the ethnology of our own people is almost unknown. The need for definite knowledge of the ethnic constituents of our population is evident; and I know of no better means of gaining such knowledge than through the extension of the work of the scientific bureau, in which the principles of ethnology were established.

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Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell. P. S. I send copies of this letter to ex-Senator Henderson and Mr. Hitt, for their information as members of the Executive Committee of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution. A. G. B. (COPY)